DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 128 716 CG 010 824

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TITLE A Test of the Urban Overload Hypothesis.
PUB DATE [70]
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association (New York, N.Y., April, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Patterns; City Problems; Comparative Analysis; Field Studies; *Interpersonal Relationship; *Rural Urban Differences; *Social Relations; Surveys; *Urban Environment
IDENTIFIERS *Crowding

ABSTRACT

This paper briefly discusses three studies aimed at exploring the overload hypothesis posited by Stanley Milgram. That hypothesis suggests that impoverished social interaction in the city is an adaptation to overload of interpersonal contacts. The three studies examine various aspects of the phenomenon using different methodologies. Comparing city and town dweller behaviors, one survey indicates that city respondents have fewer but longer contacts with friends and acquaintances, both by telephone and face-to-face. In terms of feelings of overload, city and town both evince low levels of feeling overloaded with interpersonal contact. Another study, of an experimental nature, indicates that interaction with a stranger is avoided in the city as opposed to encouraged in a suburb or small town. These studies suggest that Milgram's hypothesis is too general and undifferentiated. (SJL)

A TEST OF THE URBAN OVERLOAD HYPOTHESIS

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Social interaction in the city has seemed to many to be superficial and asocial, if not antisocial. In "The Experience of Living in Cities" (1970), Stanley Milgram suggested that impoverished social interaction in the city is an adaptation to overload of interpersonal contacts in the city. Milgram hypothesized that social behavior in the city can be understood as the resultant of strategies to reduce overload, strategies which operate to reduce the number, duration, or intensity of interpersonal contacts.

Milgram's approach is noteworthy in introducing an explicitly social definition of crowding: Overload is a function of interaction density, rather than physical density. Thus defined, overload is a theory of crowding and the effects of crowding in the city. It is obvious that empirical support for the overload hypothesis must come from comparison of social interaction in city and small town. Three studies aimed at exploring the overload hypothesis are reported here.

The first step in testing the overload hypothesis was to make some decisions about what the hypothesis predicted. In the general form in which Milgram stated it, the overload hypothesis leads us to expect that overload of any or all kinds of interpersonal contacts will result in strategies to reduce the number, duration, or intimacy of ~~all~~ any or all kinds of interpersonal contacts. But not all kinds of contacts can be measured in the same study of the same people, so some division and narrowing of the question is necessary in order to get on with research. Our studies divided

the whole realm of interpersonal contacts into three categories: contacts with household family, contacts with acquaintances and friends, and contacts with strangers. These categories may be thought of as partly determined a priori, but partly determined by the results of the first study. Initial study of the overload hypothesis in the urban environment revealed that 1) people have difficulty recalling contacts longer ago than yesterday; 2) people do not spontaneously recall contacts with secretaries, bus drivers, cashiers and others who are not known personally; and 3) people do not recall contacts with those in their own households, at least not as discrete interactions having duration and topic content. Family contacts are recalled only as a length of time spent in the same place with some conversation occurring.

The fact that people do not recall interactions that occur in the course of daily routine, with bus drivers, secretaries etc., is a suggestion that there exists an overload of these contacts in the city. Although fraught with practical difficulties, it would be interesting to compare city and town on the number of daily interactions with persons not known by name. This study was not attempted, however. What was done instead was to compare city and town on the contacts that respondents could recall: contacts with those whose first names were known. Because of the indistinct nature of recollection about contacts within the household, household contacts were specifically excluded from the scope of the inquiry. In order to assure comparability of respondents' yesterdays, all interviewing in the study

was done on Tuesday through Thursday, so that all recollections were of weekdays Monday through Wednesday.

A survey study of communication with acquaintances, in city and small town, comparing Montreal and Ste. Marie de Beauce, indicated that, behaviorally, city and town differed in that city respondents had fewer but longer contacts with friends and acquaintances, both by telephone and face-to-face. In terms of feelings of overload, city and town were indistinguishable in evincing low levels of feeling overloaded with contacts. Since city and town did not differ in the intimacy of the topics of conversation nor in the intimacy of relations with contacts, and since the fewer contacts in the city were balanced by longer duration of contacts in the city, the conclusion must be that the survey did not find evidence of overload of acquaintances and friends in the city.

A third study consisted of a search for evidence of overload in contacts with strangers. Since people cannot spontaneously recall interactions with strangers, the third study used an observational, rather than a recall, method. Two locations, a branch Post Office and a nearby large store, were selected in each of three settings: center city (Philadelphia), suburb (Bryn Mawr), and small rural town (Parkesville). Two different experimenters, one male and one female, separately and independently spent two hours between 1 PM and 3 PM on a weekday standing outside the front door of each of the two locations in each of the three settings. The measure of interaction was the success of the experimenter in establishing eye con-

tact with people approaching the doorway of Post Office and store. A secondary measure was the initiation of verbal interaction by those approaching the doorway. Both measures, but particularly the eye contact measure, showed that interaction with a stranger was avoided in the city, by comparison with suburb and small town

Together these three studies make clear that the original overload hypothesis as enunciated by Milgram was too general and undifferentiated. About interactions with immediate family, there is yet no evidence; but interactions with acquaintances and friends show no signs of overload in city compared to small town. It is in interactions with strangers that there is avoidance of contacts in the city. This is evidence consistent with an overload of contacts with strangers that has effects only in the realm of contacts with strangers; and has immediate implications for planning and dealing with high density urban areas.